



Research Paper

INDIGENOUS TRIBAL FOOD AMONGST THE *Galos* AND THE *Idu mishmis* OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH, INDIA

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Abstract

Foods from the natural environment which became included into the cultural food use patterns of a group of indigenous people are known as indigenous foods. Indigenous food has a great socio-cultural relevance in addition to the amount of flavour and nutrients it provides. The indigenous population of Arunachal Pradesh, India that comprises of 25 major tribes are in practice of depending on the natural resources for their food, medicine and beverages, and as livelihood from time immemorial. The region has rich diversity of cultural ecosystems that sustained the indigenous community through ages, leading to existing of wide variety of indigenous foods. The *Galos* and the *Idu Mishmis* are among the major tribes of the state having much dependence on the nature and natural resources. In their entire forms of food and beverages, they depend mostly on wild plants and animals as a major constituent in absence of which many socio-cultural ceremonies and traditional rituals are incomplete. This makes these food and beverages more than a nutritional requisite. The collective wisdoms of resource used in natural environments known to these communities are disappearing in the face of modernization and technological development. Traditional knowledge of these resources is being gradually lost from indigenous societies. In the event of this loss, there is a need of urgent attention to bring recognition to the great variety of potentially useful plants and animals used as food and medicine that exist in this hilly state, and to stimulate research and documentation on nutritional and ethno-biological aspects. The present paper attempts to document some of the important indigenous traditional food of the *Galo* and the *Idu Mishmi* tribes of the State.

Key words: *Traditional knowledge, foodways, tribes, food-gathering.*

INTRODUCTION

The indigenous community of the Himalayan State of Arunachal Pradesh in India which comprises of ethnic Tribal population of 25 major and 100 minor tribes are in practice of depending on the natural resources for their food, medicine and beverages from time immemorial. These foods from their natural environment that are included into the cultural food of the indigenous community become the indigenous foods of the region. This indigenous food has a great socio-cultural relevance in addition to the amount of flavour and nutrients it provides. Arunachal Pradesh possesses a rich ecological, floral and faunal biodiversity and contributes most of the Eastern Himalayas Biodiversity Hotspot. It shares international boundaries with Bhutan to the west, Tibetan China to the north-west, Myanmar to the east and main-land China in the north. It also shares the same ecological zone with Southeast Asia. In many ways the cultures of North East India are akin to the Southeast Asia [1]. The *Galos* and the *Idu Mishmis* are among the tribes with rich traditional knowledge in using natural resources as food and medicines. The *Galo* tribe inhabits the districts of West Siang, Lower Siang, Lepa Rada and Upper Subansiri in the State. The *Idu Mishmis* inhabit in the hills and mountainous ranges in eastern most part of the state as well as in the foothills of Lower Dibang Valley, Dibang Valley and Lohit districts. These tribes of the State belong to the Tibeto-Burman group. Having close proximity with nature, they are heavily dependent on the natural resources for their subsistence and livelihood [2].

The tradition and diverse culture of Arunachal Pradesh has always remained as the main attraction for national and international tourist. Food forms an essential part of the culture of North East India, and in an outsider's urge to understand the unknown; the food of Arunachal Pradesh is a topic that draws a lot of attention. The first thing about the food of Arunachal Pradesh is that it differs from tribe to tribe. The people in the eastern and the central part of the State are dependent on bamboo and other leafy vegetables in boiled form. Fried food is not very popular as people like to eat either boiled or smoked food. As move towards the western side or towards the district of Tawang and places closer to China, the uses of dairy products are dominant.

Agricultural is the primary source of food management for the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. Cultivation practices in the region are in the form of shifting and settled. Shifting cultivation or swidden is an agricultural practice as old as the neolithic,

involving long fallow periods that allow soil fertility to recover after one to two years of agriculture [3][4]. It is characteristic of the nutrient-poor soils of tropical forests, where cultivated lands may require years or decades to become agriculturally productive again [5]. In the region, this form of cultivation is popularly known as *Jhum* cultivation. Majority of the tribes inhabiting the state of Arunachal Pradesh are dependent on this practice, although most farming communities have more recently taken up settled cultivation as well [6].

The traditional subsistence economy of the *Galo* tribe is based on shifting or *Jhum* agriculture. Due to the rugged topography, inaccessibility and heavy rainfall, low population density and lack of other infrastructural development, the *Galos* are compelled to continue shifting cultivation as a main means of sustenance. But, there is a much refinement in the technique of cultivation because of the centuries of repetition of the same system [7]. Apart from agriculture, the *Galos* also practice a variety of food-gathering techniques. Most of their settlements are surrounded by forests with verities of flora and fauna providing rich resources for subsistence. They gather wild foods, hunt game, trap birds from the forests, and fish from the streams [8].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Area

Arunachal Pradesh lies between 26° 28' to 29° 30' N latitude and 91° 30' to 97° 30' E longitude. The topography is characteristically rugged due to lofty, haphazardly arranged mountain ranges and deep valleys crisscrossed by a number of river and rivulets spreading along the southern slopes of Potkoi hills and around the huge valley of the river Brahmaputra [9]. There are five major climatic zones viz, tropical, sub-tropical, temperate, sub-temperate and alpine. The environmental variability and the culture affinity of the indigenous tribes with flora and fauna make the region a unique. The *Galos* are dominated in the districts of West Siang, Lepa Rada and Lower Siang which falls in the central part of the State. The *Idu Mishmis* dominated the district of Lower Dibang Valley and Dibang Valley which is in eastern part of the State.

Methodology

In order to collect the data on indigenous food of the *Galo* and the *Idu Mishmi* tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, the district of West Siang, Lower Siang and Lepa Rada were selected

for the *Galos* and Lower Dibang Valley was selected for the *Idu Mishmis*. Sampling were done randomly in the villages of Doji, Bagra, Aalo, Bam, Nari and Likabali of West Siang District and in Koronu, Mayu and Ejengo villages of Lower Dibang Valley district. In each of the villages an informal discussion were held with the local priest and traditional knowledge holders. The knowledge holders were interviewed in an informal environment. Audio recording of the entire interview were made complemented by written notes. The audio recording were later translated and transformed into a written draft. Demonstrations on the preparation of some of the traditional food items were also performed by the knowledge holders.

RESULTS

It was observed that the *Galos* and the *Idu Mishmis* of Arunachal Pradesh had varied forms of indigenous food. These foods are not prepared in their daily basis, but, during festivals and rituals, it is the indigenous food items that are prepared and served most. Some of the important indigenous foods of these tribes are as follows;

Indigenous food of the Idu Mishmis

Yambawa

Yambawa is considered to be one of the most nutritious indigenous foods of the *Idu Mishmi* tribe. This food remained as the staple food of this tribe at the time when the rice cultivation was not popular or not productive. This food is prepared from flour made from *Yamba* called *Yambato* (a cultivated plant), rice, *Anga-sha* (dried fish), *Aposhi-anjishi* (a mixture of dried bamboo-shoot and ginger), *Athasi* (*Zanthoxylum* seed) and *Inchito* (dried chilli powder).

Yambawa has two preparatory phases. In the first phase it is prepared by mixing *Yambato* with small quantity of steamed rice. In second phase, a mixture of *Aposhi-anjishi* and *Anga-sha* is prepared in soup form. As an additive flavor, *Athasi* is added to the soup. *Yambawa* is served along with the soup.

The importance of this food among the *Idu Mishmi* tribes is that this food can be prepared with the involvement of very less amount of rice grain. Further, during olden days the ingredients were easily available which substituted the less availability of rice grain. This food is also highly nutritious that fulfills the major nutritional requirement of

a human being. It is believed that taking *Yambawa* as food keeps a person healthy throughout.

Ekari

Ekari is another important indigenous food of the *Idu Mishmi* tribe. This food is popularly prepared and served during *Reh* rituals. *Ekari* is said to be a food that keeps the tummy full for longer duration.

It is prepared from *Ekabra* (dried seed of a plant), *Anga-sha* and *Aposhi-anjishi*. The *Anga-sha* and *Aposhi-anjishi* is simmered in a small quantity of water. *Ekabra* is separately steamed to cook. The boiled mixture of *Anga-sha* and *Aposhi-anjishi* is stewed with the steamed *Ekabra* and allowed to be soften properly.

Abrathra

Abrathra is a food item which can be kept for long duration for consumption without losing its taste and quality. This food was generally prepared to be carried during the course of long journeys. In olden days in the absence of transportation facilities in the hills, this food was preferred most by the travelers. *Abrathra* is also believed to have medicinal values for diabetic.

Abrathra is prepared by making paste of *Abrato* (flour made from *Abra* seed known as *Abraku*). The paste is placed in the wild leaves *Alana* (*Phrynium pubinerve*) and bundled properly. The bundle containing the paste of *Abrato* is placed beneath the burning charcoal and ash in the fire place and kept till it is cooked.



Yambawa



Ekari



Abrathra

Indigenous food of the Galos

Amin

Rice, being the staple in the region, has its presence in a majority of the main course dishes. Apart from the simple steamed rice, the rice grain is used for preparation of various form of food. *Amin* (kind of porridge) is an indigenous food deeply rooted with *Galo* tradition and culture. *Amin* has the most important socio-cultural relevance among the *Galo* society. According to *Galo* tales, its existence is dated back to the days of introduction of Agricultural practices by the mankind. *Amin* is prepared and served at time in all forms of holy and festive occasions. It is the food served foremost during the *Galo* festival as well as in the rituals.

The literal term “*Amin*” in *Galo* means “crushed or crushed form”. The food *Amin*, is prepared from crushed rice-grain, and probably it has been named for its forms.

For preparing *Amin*, the rice grain is crushed into small pieces. Though plain *Amin* (Vegetarian form) also prevails, meat is an important constituent of *Amin*. It can be prepared with any form of meat ranging from wild animal to that of domesticated one. But, the most preferred and common form of *Amin* is the one prepared with Chicken. *Amin* prepared with chicken is called “*Porok Amin*”. This is the form of *Amin* generally prepared in all forms of rituals and festivals. The crushed rice powder is stirred heavily in boiled water with meat until it is fully mixed. Crushed fresh ginger makes the important constituent of the food. It gives the aroma and the flavour of the food. During the study, it has been observed that the ginger makes the indigenous food culturally

relevance. The *Galos* consider ginger as the most holy food item; therefore its use is totally avoided during unholy times.

Amin is a food prepared during holy occasions or rituals only and ginger is one of the important components of this food. Therefore, no *Amin* is prepared in any house or family during unholy rituals or during the period of unnatural deaths.

Amin take (Amin `take)

Amin-take (*Amin-`take* as written in *Galo* Script) is an indigenous food which are generally prepared and served during rituals. It is also a popular dish on the occasion of house warming in the villages. *Amin-take* is an admixture of steamed rice, steamed fish and freshly crushed ginger. The three constituent of this food, rice, steamed fish and freshly crushed ginger is mixed together in a form of bowl wrapped in *ekkam* (*Phrynium pubinerve*) and served.

Itii (Wtww)

Itii (*Wtww*, as written in *Galo* Script), is a rice cake prepared from rice flour. This is a kind of *Galo* food used in most of the rituals and festivals. The rice flour is mixed with water to make the flour a paste like form. Then paste is placed in *ekkam* leaves in a flatted form and bundled. The *Itii* bundle is boiled in water till it is cooked properly. In olden days *itii* was one of the substitutes for rice. It was considered as favoured food for infants owing to its softness.

Itii is also considered as the food of holiness. Therefore, it is not prepared in unholy rituals or at the time of any unnatural deaths.



Amin



Amin take



Itii wrapped in the leaf of *Phrynium pubinerve*

DISCUSSION

Indigenous foods can be categorized as plant foods, animal foods, earth elements such as salts, and water. There are hundreds of plant species which are used as the basic components of these foods. The indigenous foods of the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh are dominantly based on plant and animal items. The region remained land-locked for long time due to hostile and terrain geographical features. Therefore, the indigenous people of the region remained poorly inaccessible to the outside world. This made them dependent on their own knowledge and skill on food harnessing. This way the indigenous tribes in the region developed their own foodways and knowledge related to it. As a result, every tribes of the State has their own indigenous food varying from each other. The region is a culturally rich; thus, most of the indigenous food of the region has cultural relevance.

The collective wisdom of resource use in natural environment known to indigenous people is disappearing in the face of modernization and technological development. Young people are no longer systematically taught by their elders to survive using only the natural environment. Hence, valuable information on these resources is being passed to fewer people, and gradually being lost from indigenous societies, as well as from collective human knowledge. In the face of this loss, there is need of urgent attention to help in bringing recognition to the great variety of potentially useful plant and animal used for indigenous foods that exist in this hilly region, and to stimulate

awareness on nutritional, ethno-biological aspects and bio-chemical properties as well as for conservation of the species.

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